

Challenges of Photography 3: Difficult Photo Situations

Not all photo days are easy ones. Making the artistic photograph you want can sometimes seem impossible, and it's not made easier by tight deadlines and stress in the rest of your life. In the end, unpredictable technical details ruin half of your photos, while being preoccupied through the shoot claims most of the rest. Is making a great photograph just random dumb luck?

Not really. I've noticed that I make most of my really special fine art photographs close together, and usually not just when conditions are ideal for photography. I've taken many excellent photos in terrible conditions - in wind or strange light, of subjects that won't sit still, or when I'm in a hurry to go somewhere. I've discovered that the quality of the photograph I make has less to do with the situation I'm in, and more to do with how I react to it.

There are many situations that make fine art photography difficult. I've only discussed the ones I have the most direct experience with. However, the same general theme can be applied to any challenging photo situation - keep your wits about you, don't let stress take over, and try to do the best work you can!

Photography of Motion and Moving Subjects

Moving subjects display very well in the static medium of photography. A photographer can choose to freeze a moving subject, blur it, or pan a sharp subject against a blurred background. Motion is like a third dimension to photography, and learning to control it will give you a host of artistic options in otherwise difficult conditions.

Your choice of shutter speed is the main variable controlling how motion is translated into your photograph. The shorter your shutter speed, the less motion blur will appear in your photograph, and vice versa. Experiment with different shutter speeds for a given subject. You can capture motion both by freezing action with fast shutter speeds, or by smoothing randomly moving subjects with slow shutter speeds.

If part of your composition is moving randomly - like water in a stream or leaves on a tree - experiment with very long shutter speeds, holding your camera steady on a tripod. If the object is moving randomly, it will produce a smooth wash of colour and smooth tones in the photograph. If it's not moving randomly, like a tree branch in the wind, subtle "ghosting" will appear where it settles most frequently. Try using both as interesting compositional elements in your photographs.

If your subject is moving at a constant speed, try "panning" the camera using a

moderately slow shutter speed. This will keep your subject relatively sharp and blur the background. Experiment with different shutter speeds - I've found that about 1/30s to 1/125s works well.

Focusing on a moving subject can be tricky. If your auto-focus system can keep up with your subject, make sure that you properly position your active focus point - many photographers in a hurry accidentally focus on the background. Follow-focusing by hand takes experience, but can yield very good results - practice without making exposures first, then try it while shooting. If one shot is all you want, simply prefocus on a spot in front of your subject. Once your subject reaches your point of focus, expose your photograph.

By practicing and experimenting, you will find that motion can be a valuable part of your photography, and can add depth to an otherwise bland scene. You might find that moving subjects become something you will seek out instead of avoid. Motion can add a sense of depth, time, continuum and detachment to a composition - try using it whenever possible, and see what it can add to your photographs!

Photography in Quickly Changing Light

The beautiful outdoor light you find in the morning, evening, or near a storm can be a fickle mistress. In the time it takes to compose a photograph, the ambient light can dim, brighten, or shift colours radically. Your final photograph could wind up mysteriously bright, dark, or strangely tinged with yellow or blue. Successful morning, evening, and storm photography is therefore a learned skill, one that almost always requires some goofed photographs.

Your mind can be fickle in changing light too. Your eyes and brain will automatically adjust for changes in the intensity and colour of the light surrounding you. Ambient light can change drastically, and your senses will easily adjust to accommodate. If you're checking visually to make sure that unsettled light is staying true to your last metering, you'll probably wind up with a badly exposed photograph.

Your brain's interpretation of your digital camera's LCD display can change too. As the surrounding day gets darker, for example, you may wrongly see that your properly exposed photographs are overexposed, and may compensate by underexposing. LCDs can also be poorly calibrated - a bad way to judge if you've gotten a good exposure. A photograph's histogram can be helpful, but the light will continue to quickly change around you as you take the time to fully analyze your photos.

So, don't trust your brain for critical exposures, trust your light meter. Use spot metering to keep an eye on critical areas of your photo, and get a feel for which way the light is shifting, and how fast. Make metering your photograph the last thing you do before you expose. If the light is changing very quickly and evenly, you might be able to build a

correction into your exposure. For instance, if you suspect that the exposure will change to 15 seconds by the time you finish your 10 second exposure, expose for 15 seconds, or somewhere in between the two.

Expose your photograph immediately after metering. To work efficiently in rapidly changing light, learn to use your camera quickly and intuitively. Any hesitation will require re-metering, and could cost you the photograph altogether. Before bothering to meter a photograph, be sure you've composed it exactly, and have a good idea how the exposure should look. Then meter, quickly recompose, and shoot.

When the intensity of light is changing, its colour is usually changing too. Your brain will quickly adapt to the new hue, and checking a photo on an LCD display won't help. Some photographers use white balance adjustments or coloured filters to correct the colour of ambient light to nearly white. Personally, I try to use the colour of the light around me to further enhance the photograph's composition and theme.

Inattentiveness in changing light will lose potentially great photographs to poor exposures or strange colour casts. Keeping on top of lighting conditions with so much else on your mind isn't easy, but you'll thank yourself later for staying alert. The light is often most beautiful when it is most volatile, so keep your wits about you and make it into art while you can!

Photography in a Hurry

Nothing can ruin a photography expedition quite the same as being in a hurry. Rushing through a photo shoot has cost me more creative photographs than bland subjects, bad weather, poor light, and all other adverse conditions combined. Overcoming my own mind has become an integral part of being artistic in any sense, especially when I'm in a rush. With effort and experience, however, I've found that I can focus my thoughts and use my mental energy how I want to - to compose a great photograph.

If you've got a deadline, make it a definite one. Telling yourself that you've got to be back "soon" will make you rush. Setting a definite finish time will create a clear window where you don't have to worry about watching the clock. During this time, you can better use your energies for your photography.

While keeping to your deadline, your frazzled mind can easily be distracted by what's just around the corner. Don't be tempted to follow every distraction. Pick a location and stick to it for the time you have - this will let you spend your precious time making photographs instead of being in transit. Having time to photograph a mediocre subject is always better than not quite having time to photograph a great one.

Once you've found your subject, don't pressure yourself. Especially on tight timelines, it's a good idea to see your photo expedition as it is - just for fun. Needing to come back

with a really important photo in a short time will only increase the odds of a "choke" - uncreative photographs of a subject that deserved better, or no photographs at all. Take a fraction of your time to calm down, breath, and enjoy your surroundings for a moment. Strangely, not pressuring yourself to create great photos is essential to the process of creating great photos.

To prepare for working quickly, learn to use your camera intuitively. Fully understanding the basics of making a good quality photograph will come in handy during a time-limited situation. Experienced photographers spend most of their time thinking about how they want their subject to look, and almost no time making it look that way. Fiddling with the technical details of one photograph will rob you of time for the next. If you are unsure of an exposure or are waffling between two compositions, just expose for all the options and leave the time-consuming decisions for later.

No-one likes to be rushed, but photographers must often do the best work they can in a short time. By relaxing, preparing, and setting yourself up for success, you can come home with a great collection of photos and plenty of time to spare!

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